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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the effects of the Second Step Curriculum, designed to teach the social skills necessary for children to peacefully solve problems and resolve conflicts through empathy training, impulse control, and anger management. The study focused on teachers' perceptions of the program: what they perceived to be the program benefits, how the program influenced their own interactions, and the program's impact on creating a safer school environment for learning. Participating in the study were the teachers and 419 children in kindergarten through fourth grade at an inner-city school serving low-income families. Data collection included teacher self-evaluations, interviews of one teacher from each grade level completed midway through the third year of program implementation, and observation of some lessons. Findings gleaned from teacher interviews and lesson evaluations indicated that teachers believed the program benefits included the opportunity to discuss feelings and the enhancement of other positive school programs. Teachers also suggested that the program had a positive influence on their interactions with other teachers. Teachers expressed concerns related to the transfer of training to other situations and to children at great risk because of lack of impulse control and anger management. Although teachers believed that the curriculum was effective for the majority of their students, additional measures were needed for learners highly at risk. Recommendations for taking skill development to a higher level and for meeting the challenge presented by students highly at risk include additional training for teachers, addition of the family component to the curriculum, and intensive social skills training for the at-risk students. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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ED 470 210

CELIA E. JOHNSON, ROSALYN ANSTINE TEMPLETON & GUOFANG WAN

PATHWAYS TO PEACE: PROMOTING NON-VIOLENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this qualitative study was 1.) to determine teachers' perceived benefits of the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum*, 2.) to examine teachers' perceptions of how the program curriculum may have influenced their own interactions with students, colleagues, and parents, and 3.) to provide data analysis information that could further guide the use and enhancement of the program for creating safer school environments to promote learning. Four assertions relative to benefits transfer of training, and additional needs for students highly at risk were gleaned from interviews and teacher lesson evaluations. Recommendations were made based on the assertions derived from the study.

KEY WORDS: safe schools, peacemaking, violence prevention, character education, safe school environments, school improvement, student behavior, children at risk

If we are to reach real peace in this world...we shall have to begin with the children.
---Mahatma Gandhi

1. Purpose

The purpose of this study was focused on teachers' perceived effects of the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum.* The first objective was to determine the perceived benefits of the program and identify specific evidence supporting those perceptions. Second, data were collected to examine teachers' perceptions of how the program curriculum may have influenced their own interactions with students, colleagues, and parents. The third, and final objective, was to provide data analysis information that could further guide the use and enhancement of the program for creating safer school environments to promote learning.

2. Perspectives

Society's ills are often manifested in the abusive and violent behaviors of it members as they reek havoc and destroy all about them, including the future which lies in its' children. Most Americans would not dispute that violence in our society has reached a level that is out of control

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and frightening. Unfortunately, our society, which includes the school system, in its trauma has moved into a panic/survival mode, as is often the case when experiencing trauma. Shifting into the panic/survival mode has prompted a resurgence of using power for control. As Hyman and Snook (2000) recently stated, America is returning to an 18th-century model of punishment and retribution in dealing with misbehavior, deviancy, and delinquency. The concern here is that punishment rarely, if ever, diminishes or corrects inappropriate behavior, or teaches appropriate behavior. In fact, the hard nosed zero tolerance policies implemented in our schools [23 states continue to allow corporal punishment (United States Department of Education, 1997), schools using metal detectors and locked doors to promote safety, police are patrolling school hallways, detentions and suspensions are being served by six year old children] have served only to exacerbate anger and violence while denying our children an environment in which they can grow to be healthy individuals in a democratic society (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 1998; Block, 1997; Futrell, 1996; Hyman & Snook, 2000; Lantieri, DeJong, & Dutrey, 1996; National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools, 2000).

Our disciplinary methods of power and control are doing a fine job of teaching children to use aggressive and inappropriate behaviors in response to other's aggressive and inappropriate behaviors, creating a cycle of violence that is self-perpetuating. Would it not better serve the children, and the society as a whole, to teach peaceful appropriate behaviors that support respect for one another's rights, allowing our children to grow into successful participants in a democratic society? Research has shown that schools where the following elements are highly evident have lower levels of violent behavior; quick and nonintrusive intervention of misbehavior,

nurturance, inclusiveness, community cohesiveness, academic goals, and modeling of respectful behavior (Aleem & Moles, 1993; Walker, 1994).

Evidence attesting to the lack of appropriate social skills is staring us blatantly in the face, more than we could have ever imagined. Juvenile crime in the United States has been on the rise until most recently. Yet in spite of the fact that juvenile crime has decreased, the rate is still higher than it was in the previous two decades, and the viciousness of crimes by our young people cannot be disputed. The ills of society have not spared our children, whether they are from urban, suburban, or rural communities (Bey & Turner, 1996; Lantieri, 1995). The following statistics from the Children's Defense Fund (1998) clearly and profoundly illustrate the crisis:

*An average of 14 children die each day from gunfire in America - approximately one every 100 minutes.

*In 1994 there were nearly 200 million firearms in American homes - almost one for every adult and child.

*1 child in 680 is killed by gunfire before age 20 - a child is wounded every 23 minutes - a child is killed every 100 minutes.

*Violent crime by young people peaks between 3 and 7 p.m.

*Every 15 seconds a child is arrested.

*Every 5 minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime.

*1 child in 5 is poor.

*1 child in 3 will be poor at some point in childhood.

*1 child in 11 lives at less than half the poverty level.

*Every 10 seconds a child is reported abused or neglected.

*Every 4 hours a child commits suicide.

Although many children are resilient, and manage to survive in spite of the challenges, they most frequently lack the skills necessary to behave in socially appropriate ways, and frequently grow into angry adults who perpetuate the cycle of violence. Teaching children to cooperate and communicate and respect others has become a daunting, complicated task, but a task that is without question, necessary for life, and for optimal learning to occur. Fortunately, there are schools where children are being taught the kinds of skills that support peaceful ways of problem solving, self-discipline, respect for self and others, and hope for a democratic society. One such program used at Eastside Primary School, is the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum* (Committee for Children, 1991).

"Providing safe learning environments for our children in America's schools will only happen when teachers are better trained to improve school discipline and decrease abuse" (Hyman & Snook, 2000, p. 500). Grounded in research, the *Second Step Curriculum* is designed to teach the social skills necessary for children to peacefully solve problems and resolve conflicts. The program has been shown to reduce aggressive and violent behavior in elementary school children (Grossman et al., 1997; Staff, 1998). In an empirical study of 12 elementary schools utilizing the *Second Step Curriculum* over a six month period, students enrolled in the program showed more socially desirable conduct on the playground, in the cafeteria, and in the classroom compared with the control group children, who exhibited more aggressive behaviors. The purpose of this research was to explore the effects of the *Second Step Curriculum* by examining teachers' perceptions of the program; what they perceived to be the program benefits, how the program influenced their own interactions, and the program's impact on creating a safer

school environment for learning.

3. Method

After a typical weekend of watching cartoons, eating at McDonald's, playing with friends and getting haircuts, our children wake up on Monday mornings anticipating the day at school. The feelings that surround thoughts of school are a mix different from any other experience that spans a continuum of extremes. There are feelings of excited anticipation to see good friends, to work on that special project, to hear the teacher read the next chapter in *Charlotte's Web*; feelings of anxiety in anticipation of the Olympic competitions in gym class, of the timed math test, of the reptile visitor; feelings of fear in anticipation of the bullies in the restrooms, behind the stairwell, on the playground, and on the bus or streets when going to and from school. Teachers too, have a range of feelings at the end of a weekend as they prepare for Monday. Teachers feel excited about teaching the lessons they have worked hard to prepare (the school-wide thematic unit on Creepy, Crawly, Critters), about enthusiasm generated by student teachers, about teaching the first lesson in the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum*; they feel anxious about the exit level tests coming up, about parent conferences, about the reptile visitor; and they feel somewhat fearful of the angry children, some returning from suspensions.

Each Monday, teachers and students enter Eastside Primary School, nestled off of a one-way street in a rundown area of town. Eastside Primary School's neighbor is a large medical facility that resides in the heart of a metropolitan setting of approximately 400,000 people. There is not a feeling of neighborliness, which surely contributes to the high mobility that ranges from approximately 63% to 90+%, depending on the year. Ninety-eight percent of the 419 children in pre-K through fourth grades come from low-income families, and qualify for the reduced or free-

lunch program. In this inner city school, the teachers have hope for the children they teach and are participants in programs geared to provide children with the kinds of skills they will need to successfully participate in a democratic society. Eastside Primary School is a Success for All school that utilizes a peer mediator program, and is a strong supporter of the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum.* All of the teachers at Eastside Primary School have been trained in the *Second Step Curriculum.*

The *Second Step Curriculum* was introduced in the fall of 1997 at all grade levels. The teachers spent six hours on a Saturday being trained in using the *Second Step Curriculum,* and each received a teaching kit for their grade level. Teachers presented approximately one 20 minute lesson per week with lessons centered on a discussion, activity, and role play format (lessons include picture visuals with a story, songs and puppets). The lessons build sequentially, and therefore were taught in the intended order. After each introductory lesson, skills focused on were reinforced throughout the day and week, in what was called transfer of training. The head teacher at Eastside Primary School served as a liaison person for support, and connection between the teachers, trainers and evaluator. She was interviewed, along with one volunteer teacher from each grade level. Additionally, all teachers were periodically asked to complete self-evaluation forms on lesson presentations. Taped interviews and the self-evaluation forms provided the qualitative data for this study. At the end of the second year (1998-1999) in the program, the head teacher/liaison requested a reassignment back to the classroom, and a new head teacher/liaison was hired for the third year (1999-2000). The focus of the research was threefold, 1.) to determine teachers' perceived benefits of the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum*, 2.) to examine teachers' perceptions of how the program curriculum

may have influenced their own interactions with students, colleagues, and parents, and 3.) to provide data analysis information that could further guide the use and enhancement of the program for creating safer school environments to promote learning.

4. Description

Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum is a broad-based curriculum for dealing with violence through empathy training, impulse control, and anger management while focusing on language skill development. The format is a friendly, multi-sensory approach that includes a variety of materials: story photograph cards that present situations for discussion; puppets (Slowdown Snail and Impulsive Puppy) and scripts to use in storytelling and role playing; structured skill-building activities for role playing; an evaluation kit; take-home letters for parents; suggested activities for parents; an annotated list of children's books; an audio tape of songs; and a Spanish supplement to the manual. An additional corresponding program, which was not utilized during this study, is *A Family Guide to Second Step: Parenting Strategies for a Safer Tomorrow* (Committee for Children, 1995).

Research has shown that it takes two to three years for teachers to get comfortable with new programs such that they effectively teach and support new skill development (Fullen, 1991). So, after completing the training during the first year of the program, teachers began teaching and familiarizing themselves with the lessons. After the first pilot year, and during the second year, teachers completed monthly self-evaluations on their teaching of the lessons. Midway through the third year, teachers again filled out a self-evaluation, and volunteers were solicited for interviews. One teacher from each grade level (kindergarten through fourth grade; kindergarten and third grade teachers were special education teachers) participated in taped

interviews to gather

information on the perceived effects of the *Second Step Curriculum.* Additionally, the assessor observed the teaching of some lessons.

5. Interpretation

Eastside Primary School is an island where teachers have come together with their hearts, energy, and talents to teach children at risk. Their hope is to teach the children the kinds of skills they will need to be successful participants in a democratic society by utilizing a variety of strategies, of which one is the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum*. How they perceive what is happening with their efforts is critical as they continue to pursue the challenge of working with such large numbers of children considered at risk. The teachers' perceptions of the *Second Step Curriculum* are discussed relative to the focus of the research.

5.1 *Perceived Benefits*

Although the perceived benefits were motivating factors in the teachers' support of the *Second Step Curriculum*, the initial motivating factor was most likely the administrative position supporting the *Second Step Curriculum*. The principal's strong support for the program is evident in the following statements.

> It (the *Second Step Curriculum*) motivates me because it is a requirement, and our principal checks it on our lesson plan books to make sure it is there. It is kind of fun. They really (children) start opening up to you.

> Well, besides the principal asking us and telling us to put it on, or make sure we try and teach it (the *Second Step Curriculum*) every week, and to review it and focus on that to help the kids resolve their problem, I am motivated by the fact that I have seen some improvements in their (children's) behavior and their willingness to talk it out, and fewer or less frequency of physical fighting...

As can be seen, once the teachers began teaching the lessons, the motivating factors transitioned to the actual program benefits.

Additionally, when asked what teachers saw as benefits of the *Second Step Curriculum*, teachers frequently addressed the opportunity that the program provided for the discussion of feelings. One teacher commented, "It (*Second Step Curriculum*) helps to recognize other children's feelings, and adults' feelings as well, and gives them some tools to use, gives them some ways of dealing with anger and dealing with others feelings." Another teacher had similar things to say, "...kids recognize their feelings...it helps them identify their feelings and then talk to others about how it made them feel." and, "...it gets kids to talk, to really talk out their problems." Still, another teacher commented, "The kids get to verbalize I guess their feelings, and they get to hear someone else verbalize them so then they actually get a chance to even think that this is part of them. And that other people have similar feelings for similar reasons."

After teaching one of the lessons, a teacher wrote on her lesson evaluation, "This was a great lesson - the kids realized there was more than one way to solve a problem and say what you mean and found ways to work conflicts out that would not hurt others' feelings..." In identifying personal strengths in teaching the lessons, one teacher again addressed the opportunity for talking about feelings saying her strength was, "allowing students to practice expressing feelings."

Another benefit of the *Second Step Curriculum* may be that it enhances other positive programs in the school. For instance, one teacher expressed her opinion stating, "...I think that they (the children) are able to verbalize better in the peer mediator program because they have been taught this (the *Second Step Curriculum*) in the classroom."

5.2 *Influence on Teachers' Interactions With Others*

Experienced teachers have long recognized that the best learning occurs when one in-turn teaches another. This concept is illustrated explicitly by the following comments credited to William Glasser:

> We Learn:
>
> 10% of what we READ
> 20% of what we HEAR
> 30% of what we SEE
> 50% of what we both HEAR & SEE
> 70% of what we DISCUSS with others
> 80% of what we EXPERIENCE personally
> 95% of what we TEACH someone else

Likewise, the teachers at Eastside Primary School felt similarly about the *Second Step Curriculum*. One teacher compares her learning with the students saying, "Well, as I mentioned, like with the students, my interaction with them is [that I'm] more willing to try to get a problem resolved, to get it worked out." She goes on, "...it's influenced me in the way that I talk to the kids and give them an opportunity to tell their sides and to talk to each other... I think it has helped me to become a more focused teacher and probably more calm and more willing to try to, like I said, work [it] out."

Even in working with colleagues, teachers expressed their perceptions of the impact of the *Second Step Curriculum*. A teacher states, "...with my colleagues, maybe we're taking a little bit more time to talk through problems instead of just acting through problems that arise from, in the daily routine." Another teacher felt similarly, saying that if she had a colleague that she disagreed with while working on a project, she "...would feel more comfortable being able to...focus more on the feelings and trying to resolve the conflict rather than just exploding." And yet another shares, "...I am kind of a strong willed person so it has influenced me to look at other peoples' viewpoints and other perspectives,

and not always thinking that mine is the correct one." The following quote illustrates how teaching the *Second Step Curriculum* is also an opportunity for learning and perfecting one's own skills:

> Well, it (the *Second Step Curriculum*) helps me, it has given me ways to help the children deal with anger, I mean before this I may not see some of these things that I didn't even think of ...it helps me know what I see...it has given me ways to deal with and resolve some of their (children's) problems that even I really didn't ever think of before. I can follow the steps and help the children solve problems. It also helps me solve some of my own problems. Those steps may seem kind of like things you already know, but you really may not think about. So, in teaching the kids, I'm also teaching myself. It helps me deal with my own problems and learning how others are feeling. It also helps me help the children deal with conflicts with each other or other adults.

5.3 *Additional Guiding Information*

Looking first at the transfer of skill training, when teachers were asked about the feedback they got from other adults related to the *Second Step Curriculum*, it was evident that they got very little, if any. Teachers made the following comments:

> No, not a lot (of feedback)...
>
> I really haven't had any feedback from the parents to tell you the truth...
>
> I can't off hand think of any right now. Gosh.
>
> No parents or adults have directly said anything about the program. I'm trying to think of past years if parents have ever said anything and I don't think they have.

One teacher did go on indicating that there was some feedback saying:

> Well, like I've said I haven't, I can't say that I have gotten it directly from the students, from the parents of the students that I've had, but indirectly they have noticed the changes at home and within, a little bit within their community as far as not, I guess arguing so much , but trying to resolve their conflicts. Other than that I don't know that I have really gotten any other feedback.

Not getting feedback can be one indication that transfer of training is an area of concern.

That concern is consistent with teachers' responses to the question, "What would you like to improve?" which included 16 different comments referring to the need for transfer of training. The following four responses illustrate this concern:

> I don't know if the kids are picking up on the skills learned to help them in daily situations...
>
> I'm not doing a very good job with carry over...
>
> I need to help children target the times when they might use their new skills.
>
> Transfer of training - targeting times when students could use their new skills - trying to put it all together and use it at conflict times.

Although there was strong concern focused on the need for transfer of training, some teachers felt that one of the strengths they had in the teaching of the *Second Step Curriculum* was in their efforts to support transfer of training. Two teachers responded to the question, "What do you feel were your strengths?" saying, "Transferring the learning to classroom and playground situations." and "Ideas for transferring skills into neighborhood and home situations." Even with concerted effort in the teaching of skills, it takes time for those skills to develop automaticity beyond controlled situations.

Given the description of the children attending Eastside Primary School, one can conclude that the majority, if not all, the children would be considered at risk. As unfortunate as this is, in looking at children within a defined environment, we are able to identify the children who would fall into the extreme range of risk at Eastside Primary School. During one interview, a teacher indicated that empathy was starting to develop in her students, but that the lack of impulse control and anger management for a few students was so great that the empathy was elusive. She states,

> ...the empathy has started to come, and I've seen more of that, but what I have noticed, unfortunately, in the last year or so is a lot more, is the lack of impulse control, and just exploding and anger and not being able to even recognize what is triggering those feelings, and

probably about a handful of my students are like that. They can't ever recognize feelings or the triggers that cause them to feel that way, and then associate those feelings with the triggers. So, those are the students that I'm having the most challenge with.

6. Evaluation And Recommendations

After gleaning information from teachers' lesson evaluations, observations, and interviewing, interpretations were made to determine teachers' perceptions about the *Second Step Curriculum*. Based on the threefold focus of the research, 1.) to determine teachers' perceived benefits of the *Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum*, 2.) to examine teachers' perceptions of how the program curriculum may have influenced their own interactions with students, colleagues, and parents, and 3.) to provide data analysis information that could further guide the use and enhancement of the program for creating safer school environments to promote learning, the following assertions were identified:

A. Even though students and teachers may be skeptical about the *Second Step Curriculum* at first, they became motivated because they could see the benefits of talking about feelings, and how that talking helps in dealing with anger.

B. The *Second Step Curriculum* has influenced teachers' interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and their own families by allowing them ways to discuss feelings and solve problems.

C. As a fairly new program at Eastside Primary School, the *Second Step Curriculum* has had success and initiated many positive influences. However, the impact of the *Second Step Curriculum* has not gone beyond the school walls.

D. Although teachers believed the *Second Step Curriculum* worked for the majority of students, something more was needed for the learners highly at risk.

Teachers' perceptions of the *Second Step Curriculum* are that it does provide for the teaching of skills that assist in problem-solving and that reduce violence. Although, these skills are not yet demonstrated outside the classroom, they are more evident within classrooms, as can be seen in the following shared conversation

between two teachers.

> First teacher – "And have you noticed that our kids are not as violent?"
>
> Second teacher – "Yes, I have. Because, five years ago I would have fistfights in the classroom, and we would have to call the principal over for help. I would see kids slam each other on the floor when they got mad at somebody, and we've noticed that that never happens anymore in our classrooms. We've never had an incident this whole year where someone has been violent in the classroom!"

In order to take skill development to the next level, and to meet the challenge presented by students highly at risk, the following recommendations are made:

6.1 *Additional Training for Teachers*

Although some of the teachers did not feel a need for additional training, research says it is critical for teachers to receive continuous training in the teaching of social skills to students at risk. Beyond the training in empathy, impulse control, and anger management, teachers also need to reflect on all aspects of the school curriculum (philosophy, discipline procedures, Success For All, parent education, etc.). They need time to analyze how the different components of the curriculum strengthen or weaken their goals, time to create action plans when change is needed, and time to share/discuss the progress and benefits of their efforts. In order to do this kind of analysis, teachers need opportunities to learn, 1.) how to be more empathic, 2.) about the impact of punitive/punishing disciplinary strategies on children identified as at risk, 3.) more about the hidden curriculum, and 4.) and how to empower others.

Additionally, it is recommended that the family component, *A Family Guide to Second Step* be implemented for those families who are willing to participate. Hopefully, as a few families become motivated once they experience the benefits, other families will come along.

6.2 *Additional Training for Students Highly At Risk*

Utilizing the model of the Reading Recovery programs, it is recommended that teachers systematically identify the students in their class who fall into the 20% (five or six students in each

class) at greatest risk for additional intensive social skill development. This would be an opportunity to connect with community programs that could possibly provide this service.

7. Conclusion

In doing this study, there were elements that were identified that could have influenced the outcome of the study, some human, and others environmental. The human factors involved the background of the authors, mobility of the student population, and personnel changes. The environmental factors that may have impacted the study include other programs and disciplinary procedures.

7.1. *Human Elements*

First, and foremost, two of the authors are trainers in the *Second Step Curriculum* which could have biased the interpretation, particularly of the benefits of the program. It is hoped that the three authors working together were able to be objective in their findings.

Another significant factor was that the teachers interviewed were volunteers. It is possible that other teachers would have presented a different perspective. Therefore, the intent of using the lesson evaluations was to get a more complete picture through other's perspectives as well. It is the opinion of the authors that there was consistency between those interviewed, and the lesson evaluations. Subsequently, the teachers could be biased because of their heartfelt desire to meet the needs of their children.

Additionally, the mobility level at Eastside Primary School certainly has an impact on the effectiveness and success of programming. It is difficult to consistently reinforce new skills when the children in classrooms are continuously changing. Similarly, over the three years, there were personnel (i.e. teachers, head teacher/liaison) changes that possibly affected the continuity of the program.

7.2. *Environmental Elements*

As a Success For All school, Eastside Primary School had many strategies in place in their efforts to meet the needs of their children. In addition to the *Second Step Curriculum*, the teachers also work with the children to develop conflict resolution/problem-solving skills. It is impossible, in this type of study, and with the confounding variables, to separate the positive effects of one part of the program from another part of the program. It is possible that the perceived benefits could be the result of another part of the program aside from the *Second Step Curriculum,* or as a result of the unique combination of the programs in the school curriculum.

In conclusion, due to the number of confounding variables, it is through qualitative studies that researchers are able to examine the effects of programs that would otherwise be very difficult to evaluate with more traditional quantitative methods. The assessment of the *Second Step Curriculum* in this particular study has provided information, and peaceful recommendations that can be applied by other schools seeking to improve social skills development, and reduce violent aggressive acts creating safer school environments to promote learning. One teacher summed it up nicely during her interview saying,

I need to be empathic so that I can realize that this is a big step for them (the

children), for many of them to try to solve their problems calmly and peacefully, so it is something that we work on all of the time... we are all friends, we are all here. It (school) should be a safe place to come, and I think they enjoy the classroom because of it.

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